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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W (JHUNTER/ESPRUILL)

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SUBJECT: OUR CLOSEST ALLIES? MEETING WITH INCOMING BRITISH
HIGH COMMISSIONER

REF: 08 FREETOWN 552

Classified By: Ambassador June Carter Perry for reason 1.4 (B)

¶1. (C) Incoming British High Commissioner Ian Hughes paid an office call on the Ambassador February 25. Deputy High Commissioner Rachel Cooper and DCM Glenn Fedzer also attended. The Ambassador discussed President Obama and Secretary Clinton's foreign policy objectives and areas of mutual interest in Sierra Leone, but concerns over support of UNIPSIL and the actions taken with two narco-traffickers were the key items of discussion.

¶2. (S/NF) High Commissioner Hughes conceded that HMG had not supported USG efforts to have two narco-traffickers currently under U.S. indictment expelled from Sierra Leone and turned over to the DEA. The indictments were prepared expeditiously at the request of Sierra Leone's President, Ernest Bai Koroma, and presented in November (REFTEL). British diplomats consulted during the process said their position on the issue had to come from London; Hughes' comments were the first indication that London had decided to oppose the expulsion requests. Post had earlier suspected Sierra Leone's sudden intransigence to what had been their own request came from British prodding. Hughes hinted that the British preference had been to put the traffickers on trial, and while still unable to support the expulsions, might be able to "work around" the problem following the conviction of the traffickers.

¶3. (C) In a discussion of support for UNIPSIL (United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office for Sierra Leone), Hughes revealed that HMG had advocated the reduction of helicopters (from two to one) assigned in support of UNIPSIL. The Ambassador explained that very poor infrastructure limited accessibility to many places in Sierra Leone. Many locations were also the focal point of numerous NGO and IFI projects and expatriate staff. The Ambassador noted as well that at least two aircraft were required if regularly-scheduled routine maintenance were to be maintained, and that in case of emergency the diplomatic corps may have to look to the UN for evacuation assistance. (We note that Hughes' predecessor had expressed these concerns in a diplomatic corps meeting at the UN in mid-2008.) Hughes, who noted his son flew on helicopters frequently as a member of the U.S. Army, promised to look into supporting our position.

¶4. (S/NF) Overall, High Commissioner Hughes set an excellent starting tone for bilateral cooperation in Sierra Leone, but concerns remain. It is notable that British objections were influential enough to convince President Koroma to back off his initial request to the U.S, and troubling that it appears HMG may still oppose the expulsions

following the trial. It is likely their position stems from the considerable investment made by HMG to restructure and revitalize Sierra Leone's justice sector; however, they risk quite a blow to their image should the traffickers buy themselves an acquittal or an expedited escape. If the trial ends in a conviction, the British may be more helpful, loudly declaring victory for themselves and quietly supporting Sierra Leone in passing the traffickers on to more secure circumstances in the United States.

PERRY